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Opening Extract from...

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Written by Tom Winship

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It took them just over an hour and half to get there, Paul driving fast, well over the limit all the way. It was still dark as they left Halifax – a chill, cloudless night with a full moon – but the sky turned grey around four thirty, and by the time they were past York it was blood red out to the east, shading into daylight above them.

The light made things worse. It had been about fourteen hours since the beating, leaving Paul's face bruised, one eye closed and a tooth broken. Despite that, and because the roads were empty, they had made good time on the motorways up to York, only having to slow on the narrower, twisting road across the moors.

The twenty miles across the tops, from Pickering to Whitby, then north to the tiny village of Silton, took an eternity, the huge bare hillsides stark in the periphery of his restricted vision, all his concentration tight on the thin band of tarmac. As they came out of Silton, dropping towards the coast, they sank into a thick fog, blotting out the weak dawn light. Paul switched the fog lights on and kept his eyes on the twisting stream of gleaming cat's-eyes.

Nearer the house, as they came over a rise, the fog thinned enough for them to glimpse the chimneys and bunkers

of the chemical works, off to the left. So he knew he was on the right track. There was a mine, on land which had once been part of the Rathmore estate, and next to it a small industrial complex owned now by a multinational. Eight years ago, when Paul had first come here, the place had still belonged to the Rathmore family and had been operating at full capacity. Even at night he could remember it spewing out a yellow gas, polluting the darkness with halogen light and the grinding noise of heavy machinery. The *real* Rathmore. In darkness it had looked like a vision of hell – belching flames and fumes. Now it was all but shut down, in the process of being sold again, or decommissioned.

The road fell away from it about two miles out from the house and climbed another hill, up towards woods. They took a dirt track running between high hedges shrouded in mist. If the hill hadn't been there then you would be able to see the entire chemical plant from the front of the house. As it was, the hill and woods screened everything off, making the house difficult to find if you didn't know it was there, even with a car. Paul was navigating from memory because the satnav showed nothing but a blank space.

The main building stood by itself, isolated, woods to both sides. From the end of the dirt track it looked empty and unused, looming at them out of the fog. The woods were over four hundred years old, a mix of conifer and oak, towering over the gables so that the place was buried in their shadow. No lights on, no signs of life. Paul stopped the car in the gravel semicircle beyond the front door and stepped into the cold, damp air. He could smell the sea.

He waited for his eyes to adjust, at first keeping his torch switched off and concentrating with his ears. Past the edge of the gravel, where the neglected flower beds straggled into the woods, he couldn't see much. No movement though, no

indication there was anyone out there besides himself. There was enough light for him to see that the front door was wide open. That set his pulse off.

It had been eight years since he had last stood where he was now and he'd been with Chris and Lara then. They had all been sixteen years old. The place looked only a bit smaller than he remembered. The central part, with the flight of eighteen stone steps up to the gaping door, gave onto two symmetrical wings, which curved back towards the woods. Twenty bedrooms over four floors, everything made of Portland stone. There were tall ornamental pillars either side of the door and according to the stone above one of them, they'd been there since 1826. Chris always called the place Rathmore – just the single, simple name – but the words carved by the date above the door were actually *Rathmore Hall*.

Paul switched the torch on and looked behind him to where the policeman – DS Andy Macall – had got out and was standing by the open passenger door of the Focus. 'They're not here,' Macall said, voice too loud, disappointment obvious. 'No one's here. The place is deserted.'

'The car could be round the other side,' Paul said, whispering. 'You check. I'll do the house.'

He set off without waiting for agreement. He should tell Macall about The Boat House, he knew – warn him. But in his head he was still trying to work out whether he was going to let Macall go down there. He was still trying to work out whether he could trust Macall at all. If Chris and Lara had come back here then they wouldn't be in *this* place – the collapsing nineteenth century pile – they'd be down below, at the bottom of the cliffs, in the newer place.

In 2001 – when they'd first come here – only the ground floor of the great house was still accessible. The structure

was already decaying, plaster coming off the walls, ceilings sagging, the roof leaking, weeds growing up the exterior, some of the windows broken. It looked worse now. The ground floor windows were boarded up, the upper floor window panes broken, graffiti low down on one wall. There was a prominent alarm box to the right of the door, but it couldn't have been working. Phil Rathmore – that was Chris's dad's name, the same name as the house and the chemical companies – had wanted to sell the place as soon as his elder brother was killed, but there were complications to do with tax liabilities and grants. Meanwhile he had let Chris use it every now and then. Part of the price of buying his silence. At least, that was how Chris had put it. Maybe that had been true, maybe not, but that's how they ended up there: Chris, Lara and Paul. Three sixteen-year-old kids from suburban Manchester let loose on an abandoned country manor. Absurd. Maybe Chris and Lara had been used to it, but Paul had felt like a burglar just standing in the hall.

Out the front, beyond the terrace and lawns, there was a twisting path through a mile of woods to cliffs, then rickety wooden steps down to a cove with a short private beach and a boat house. That's what they called it – The Boat House – though there were no boats there. It was a proper house, with five rooms, but it was a thirties' design, partly on concrete piles – like a pier – extending towards the beach. That was where they had stayed. There were beds and cooking facilities, even a bar. The beach was rocky and boulder-strewn, sloping away at a steep gradient, but the pier part of the house ended right over the edge of it, so that the tide would come in at night and if it was really high the water would be close enough to wake you.

Paul got his mind back to the open front door. He had an

irrational feeling of dread as he went up to it. Enough to stop him and make him look back at Macall, still fumbling in the car for the other torch. Then, as he turned back to the opening, the smell hit him – faint traces of it reaching his nose before he could even see inside. Not something overpowering, but a very particular smell.

A freaky juxtaposition. Standing in North Yorkshire, in that place – a place he knew so well – but with a smell like Afghanistan in his nose, the noise of his heart in his ears. He stepped up and moved the torch beam through the space beyond the door, but he didn't need it – it was gloomy inside, but there was enough light to see *this*. He switched the torch off. He felt the ice run into his blood.

An unmistakeable, disgusting, stinking mess. The mess that killing leaves behind – at least *that* kind of killing – hands-on, protracted, violent. It took time and strength to put someone down like that. He could read how much time and strength it had taken by looking at the trail left behind: spattered up the walls, across the carpets and sheeting, footprints smeared through it, finger marks clawing at the walls and floor where the victim had tried desperately to escape. And all the time the heart pumping out blood – litres of it; a slippery, congealing slime of black and red that even after a few hours begins to reek enough to make you gag.

But this was fresh. What he had in his nose was the specific smell of a stricken human who had *recently* bled to death. Pulse racing, heart in his mouth, he picked out the trail, took a deep breath, then stepped over the threshold. Ears straining into the silences, he followed the trail through the cavernous, empty rooms.

The path of spilled blood led right up to a shape lying at the very back of the place. Whoever it was had managed to get through the hall and two rooms, right to where a set of

tall, arched, glass doors opened onto a terrace with a view across an ornamental lawn. Maybe they'd thought to get out there, to smash the glass. There were streaks of blood down the pane, as though a hand had slipped across it. Paul looked through the glass. Outside the fog was shifting and stirring. He began to shiver, then tried to step forward.

But he couldn't move, couldn't get any nearer.

He was terrified. Because in his head all he could think was that it must be Chris, or Lara. He started to take huge, gasping breaths, his heart pounding furiously. He was caught in a split second of suspended time, with all the chaos and insanity of the last seven days rushing around him. This was where it all led. To this moment. To Chris, or Lara, to one of them lying here.

He had a sudden, unwanted image of them as they had been eight years ago. Down by The Boat House, still alive and laughing. They were sitting on the rocks, the tide out, drinking the mad cocktails that Chris invented, chatting, reading, listening to music. They had the limitless sense of time that only young people can have. He could *feel* it, as if he were actually back there, in the skin of the person he had been. The room around him faded, the sun flashed into his eyes. The weather was fantastically hot, high summer heat, the kind you only get in distorted memories. The water was the North Sea – always too cold to swim in, unless you were really out of your head – but Lara was standing at the edge of the pebble beach in a white swimsuit, threatening to try it, shouting for Chris to dare her. Paul was on a deckchair, back near the house. He was just sitting there, watching her, completely fixated by the way she was standing, the way she held herself. It was the first time he had seen her in a swimsuit, the first time he had seen so much of her. He was transfixed. The complete lack of self-consciousness, the open,

easy way she laughed. That morning they had walked along the beach and she had held both their hands, Chris and he, one each side of her. He could still feel her hand now, feel its tiny warmth against his fingers.

The stench jolted him out of the past. The image cut and his feet moved. He walked forwards like an automaton. Then stopped again, a few feet short of the body, his mind desperately searching the empty, aural space surrounding him. Had he heard something behind him? He turned and looked, moved the torch across the high, ornate ceilings, the crumbling stucco. Nothing. He stepped over to the corpse, legs trembling. He bent over and looked.

It wasn't either of them. Not Chris, not Lara. It was a man – middle-aged, dark skin, lank hair, slightly fat. He was on his front, head twisted sideways, jaw open, loose, broken and hanging from the rest of the face, smashed teeth sticking out, eyes swollen shut, nose crushed flat.

Paul heard the breath rushing out of his own lungs. Relief. This wasn't anyone he knew. He started to laugh about it, out loud. But then his stomach turned and he retched, the bile coming into his mouth before he could stop it. He swallowed hard. The battered head was resting in a thick pool of jellied blood, exposing the fatal injury. Behind the ear there was a wound so devastating there were shards of skull jutting through the clot-soaked hair.

Automatically, Paul stooped and touched the skin on the back of one of the hands. The warmth went through him like electricity. He recoiled. Only minutes ago this man had been alive, crawling, desperately trying to get away. Which meant Paul had walked into the middle of something, something that was still going on.

He caught his breath and looked frantically around him. They had to be here. Not here in this room, not here in this

building. But somewhere near. Down there, by the sea, in the other place.

That meant *he* was here also. Pasha. He was *already* here. That was all it could mean. He had been here when Chris and Lara arrived. He had been waiting for them.

Paul stood and started to run, out through the echoing rooms, back to the open front door. As he came out into the diffuse light he started to shout for Macall.